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AUTHOR Coker, Dolores M.
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ABSTRACT

Porfirio Salinas has been hailed the best painter of the Texas hill country and its bluebonnets. Born on November 6, 1910, Porfirio's teachers recognized and encouraged his drawing ability. When Porfirio found employment after school in a graphics company that also sold art supplies, he met Robert Wood, recognized for his Texas landscapes, and Jose Arpa, director of the San Antonio Art School. These two artists greatly influenced him. During the depression years, he became his family's main financial support. Later Dewey Bradford, owner of a well-known art gallery in Austin, became his agent. Because of Bradford's many contacts in the social and political circles, many prominent people (e.g., President Lyndon Johnson, Sam Rayburn, Price Daniel, and John Connally) bought Salinas' paintings. Salinas was troubled with an alcoholic problem throughout his life. Consequently, he fell into financial difficulties at the age of 47; but, with the help of friends, he learned to exercise a degree of control over it. He established new heights of fame when he painted two murals inside San Antonio's Lone Star Brewery. Porfirio Salinas died at 62 on April 18, 1973 during the season when the Texas hill country was at its height of bluebonnet profusion. (NQA)

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PORFIRIO SALINAS AND HIS BLUEBONNET LEGACY

By

Dolores M. Coker
Waco, Texas

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PORFIRIO SALINAS AND HIS BLUEBONNET LEGACY

Stretching away on every side
A great domain I see,
It fills a Texan's soul with pride
And fills his heart with glee.

Bluebonnets toss their pretty heads
Out in the fields so fair,
It surely is no secret why
Such perfume fills the air.

A land of flowers and fragrance!
One surely must exclaim,
As he breathes that fragrant ozone
In this great perfumed domain.

- Author unknown.

In 1901 Texas passed a legislative act designating the bluebonnet as the State flower. While there are many beautiful flowers that spread their wealth of rainbow hues over the hillsides and along the Texas highways, there is no doubt that the bluebonnet is the gracious queen of them all. It is a patriotic flower, indigenous to Texas soil although it is believed that the seeds were first brought over by the first Jesuit priests who planted them around the Spanish missions of the Central and South Texas area. Early Anglo settlers called the flower, "bluebonnet," because of its resemblance to a woman's bonnet. Each bluebonnet blossom unfurls five proud petals, the tips are white and the body, a beautiful blue. Bluebonnets are considered among the most difficult flowers to paint because of the tedious and precise details. Many artists have tried to capture this lovely flower in its native simplicity on canvas, but none

has expressed its beauty as eloquently as the late Mexican-American artist, Porfirio Salinas. In expressing his God-given talents, he has left a legacy of masterpieces that portray the various Texas landscapes. In particular, he has, through his paintings, bequeathed to each of us and to future generations, the beauty and strength of the sturdy little bluebonnets that each year during the spring season transform unsightly or barren land into waving fields of blue. This little flower, known in botanical terminology as "lupinus subcarnosus," is symbolic of the State of Texas and of the artistry of Porfirio Salinas.

Porfirio Salinas was born on November 6, 1910 on a farm near Bastrop, Texas. His father was a native Texan; his mother was born in Monterrey, Mexico but had grown up in Texas. Soon after Porfirio was born, his father moved the family to San Antonio where he worked as a teamster. Their home during his childhood was about two miles southwest of the Alamo. In his neighborhood, English was rarely heard. His parents worked hard to provide their seven children, four girls and three boys, with the necessities of life and generally, home life was a happy one in the Salinas family. Young Porfirio played in vacant lots, took part in boyhood games, visited the parks and old Spanish missions of the area, and romped in the San Antonio river. In those days the warm and winding river that runs through the city of San Antonio came alive with young swimmers. Bathing suits were unknown and often when young Porfirio emerged from the water and found that his clothing had disappeared, he simply searched the cypress or pecan trees along the river banks,

selected a reasonable fit, and wore it home.[1]

Although Porfirio was not a particularly avid learner, he held fond memories of his school years because his teachers and peers recognized and appreciated his ability for drawing. On one occasion during his early school years, the class had been given an assignment to do and Porfirio did not know how to do it. He began drawing instead pictures of the old Spanish missions in his tablet. When the teacher walked over to him, he was fearful that he was going to be severely reprimanded. However, the teacher upon seeing the amazingly accurate drawings, exclaimed, "Why bless you, you are an artist!"[2] His teachers urged him to work hard at developing his talent. He did, and when they saw the pictures he so diligently worked on, they bought them. In so doing, they also taught him a lesson he never forgot. Hard work equals ready cash.[3]

Later, young Porfirio found employment after school in a graphics company that sold art supplies as a sideline. Many of the local artists would come in and Salinas soon came to know them. Among them were Robert Wood, already recognized for his Texas landscapes at that time, and José Arpa, a Spanish artist who was the Director of the San Antonio Art School. These two artists had a great influence on Porfirio. They often took him along with them on field trips and into the Texas hill country northwest of San Antonio, and the eager youngster would watch them as they painted. Soon he was painting also and if anyone needed a scene painted, whether it was to be on a Christmas card or on the side of a beer truck, young Porfirio was ready to paint it.

At the age of nineteen, Salinas was listed in the San Antonio City Directory for 1929-30 as a "painter," but ten years later, the same publication listed his occupation as "artist." It was highly unusual in Texas at that time for any person to earn his living by his art alone, but Porfirio Salinas did. If any member of the Salinas family had frowned upon Porfirio's passion for painting, the depression years changed that. For Porfirio became the family's main financial support. "He really pulled us through," Mrs. Salazar, his sister later said. "When no one else could get a job or make a dollar, Porfirio could always sell a little painting."[4]

Salinas was a struggling artist when he and Mr. Dewey Bradford discovered each other. Bradford was the owner of a well-known art gallery in Austin, Texas. On a visit to San Antonio he saw a painting of a cactus displayed in one of the store windows. He was so taken with the painting that he immediately purchased it and inquired as to the artist's name and whereabouts. It took him some time to track down Salinas but when he did, this wealthy Austin businessman became his agent. Their friendship proved to be a unique artist/agent relationship that endured throughout their lives but there were many times when tensions and misunderstandings between the two threatened to destroy their relationship. Bradford introduced Salinas' paintings to the Austin public and because of his many contacts in the social and political circles, many prominent people became aware of Salinas' artwork and began buying his paintings. Before long, Salinas was being hailed as the best painter of the Texas hill country and its bluebonnets. Legend has it that

prior to this time (in the late 1920's), artist Robert Wood had decided that he could not bear to paint another bluebonnet on one of his landscapes so he had hired young Porfirio Salinas to paint them in for him at five dollars a picture.[5] Whether this is true or not, Salinas' paintings of bluebonnets are unequalled in color and beauty and are highly sought after as collector's art. One of his most famous, "Bluebonnet Masterpiece," is still owned and displayed in the First Federal Savings of Austin, Texas. Another, "Texas Bluebonnet Time," owned by the late Sam Rayburn, Speaker of the House, is now permanently displayed in the Sam Rayburn Library in Bonham, Texas. Both paintings have been reproduced as prints. When Dewey Bradford sent them to the New York Graphic Society, one of the most prestigious companies in America, for reproduction, Salinas expressed doubts as to whether or not people would still buy his paintings if they could buy prints of his work. Bradford explained that prints would provide the exposure which was necessary to establish his name. This proved to be correct because within the next few decades, his was firmly established as a renown artist of Texas landscapes. It has been said that "no one can touch him in the faithful depiction of the hill and brush country of Central and South Texas.[6] He puts on canvas not just the bluebonnets, the postoaks, and cactus, but the whole Texas atmosphere is felt when one views a Salinas painting.

Salinas excelled as a professional because he had a color memory, a standard palette of colors, a style that never deviated and the ability to recognize a worthy subject. He was thoroughly

familiar with the shape and structure of every item that he painted.[7] In his pictures, the oak and mesquite trees, buffalo grass, cactus, caliche dirt, wild flowers, and blue Texas skies were standard tools of his artistry. He was dedicated to honesty in what he painted, refusing to add or to subtract from nature. If a tree leaned, he painted it that way. He would not paint a fake or a "quickie." He painted the scenes as he saw them and in doing so, he presented the world around him with great dignity and true fidelity to color, season, and subject.

The late J. Frank Dobie, author of many books on Texas history, said that he liked Salinas' pictures because they were "honest." When Bradford had introduced Salinas to Dobie before Salinas was well-known, Dobie had remarked to Bradford that he doubted Salinas' ability to draw a good huisache tree because it was "a wild tree, uncultivated and untamed, surviving in an unfriendly environment that did not tolerate transplanting nor pampering." Bradford is said to have handed Salinas a sheet of paper whereupon Salinas proceeded to paint a landscape with a huisache tree right in the foreground. J. Frank Dobie was delighted and he bought several of Salinas' paintings, all with huisache trees in them.

At the age of 31, on February 15, 1942, Salinas married a beautiful girl from Guadalajara who worked as secretary at the Mexican National Railroad office in San Antonio. Three years later, their only daughter, Cristina, was born. Porfirio Salinas was inducted into the Army in October, 1943 and the San Antonio newspaper ran a story about him, printed a picture of one of his landscapes, and reported that the artist was closing

his studio to join the forces of Uncle Sam. There is reason to believe that Uncle Sam understands that a nature-loving artist such as Salinas could not be trained for any kind of violence for when he reported for duty, he was assigned to Ft. Sam Houston in his own hometown. He was given an office and was assigned to painting. During the years of World War II, Private Salinas was busy creating splendid murals depicting his own heritage. The large pictures on panels of wallboard fitted together to form murals which told the history of Texas. The early Spanish explorers, missions and padres, pioneer settlers, cowboys and Indians were all there.[8] Of the four pictures of bullfights painted for the officers' lounge at Fort Sam Houston by Pvt. Salinas, it was said, "The bulls are wicked looking animals, portrayed with great understanding and seem ready to jump right off the walls. His bullfighters are dressed in vivid and delightful colors and the few women shown are beautiful senoritas."[9]

Salinas made several trips to Mexico and Spain to meet and paint the famous matadors. He was enthralled with the art of bullfighting which he considered a science, and in his paintings, the anatomy of the bulls, the postures of the matadors and the splendor of the fabrics in the costumes are testimonials to his "aficion." He wrote, "The fiesta and the pageantry of the bullfight stirred the passion in me. And I felt from the very beginning - from the very first bullfight that I ever saw - a strong desire to bring this feeling to the canvas. The greatest bullfighter I have ever seen was Manuel Manolete and the movement, the vitality and sober colorful spectacle impressed me mightily."[10]

As is so often the case with genuis, the relentless drive towards ambition and recognition took its toll on Salinas in the form of an alcoholic problem that troubled him on and off for the rest of his life. At the age of forty-seven, he had fallen into financial difficulties because of this recurring problem, but with the help of friends he learned to exercise a degree of control over it. His health improved considerably and he continued to establish new heights of fame when he agreed to paint two murals inside the Lone Star Brewery in San Antonio, Texas.

Salinas was a shy, unassuming person. He came to work each day wearing a fresh white shirt and spotless khaki pants. His reticence and reserve soon gave way to good humor and soon Salinas was just "one of the boys," bantering with the Lone Star crew as he worked. He started at one end of an immense canvas twelve feet by thirty feet and painted to the other, finishing as he went. He had no sketch to guide him as he painted the Texas landscape with the famous Longhorn cattle, and to those watching him it appeared that he painted from memory, head, and heart. The daily stream of visitors who came to tour the brewery and to sample Lone Star's hospitality found the painting in progress to be very interesting and Salinas seemed to enjoy having an audience. One day the visitors applauded and Salinas took a bow as he finished painting a trail of cumulus clouds in the beautiful Texas sky. Someone exclaimed, "It's enough to make you speechless. The sky belongs to Salinas. It always has - it always will."[11]

Of all the visitors to the brewery, none was more delighted with the murals than Senator Lyndon B. Johnson, who had been

collecting Salinas' paintings since 1949. There is no doubt that Porfirio Salinas was President Johnson's favorite artist. His paintings hung in the White House as well as at the LBJ Ranch in Johnson City, Texas. Salinas was a frequent guest at the ranch and through his friendship with President Johnson, he had the opportunity to meet Presidents Diaz Ordáz and Lopez Mateos of Mexico, both of whom own Salinas paintings. Many notable people who recognized his artistic greatness and could afford his paintings in the 1950's include such past Texas governors as Buford Jester, Price Daniel, and John Connally as well as Speaker of the House, Sam Rayburn, along with other prominent politicians and individuals. His agent, Dewey Bradford, never hesitated to proclaim his protege as, "the liveliest talent on the Texas scene since Elizabeth Ney."[12]

A surprisingly strong indicator of his popularity came in the spring of 1974 when money was scarce and competition for cash was especially keen. Savings and loan associations were offering everything from blankets to meat to promote their business. The First Federal Savings at Austin offered a free Salinas print to all those who deposited five hundred dollars in its bank. It proved to be a powerful persuasive, according to the president of the bank, who said, "We have given away other items through the years but nothing has ever proven as effective as Salinas."[13]

Salinas did not ordinarily give titles to his paintings. "Why give titles?" he said. "They are whatever they say to the viewer."[14] However, one of the rare paintings that he did

entitle, was "Rocky Creek," - the old name for the Pedernales River where the LBJ Ranch is located. It was to have been a surprise gift from him to President John F. Kennedy when he reached the LBJ ranch with Vice-President Johnson on that fateful trip of November 1963. President Kennedy never knew that Salinas had painted this surprise gift for him.

Porfirio Salinas died on April 18, 1973 at the age of sixty-two. His death occurred during the season when the Texas hill country - the area that Salinas knew and loved so much - was at its heighth of bluebonnet profusion that covered the fields, the hillsides, and along the highways of his native State. Perhaps that was a fitting tribute to an artist who always expressed unerring accuracy in his landscapes and scenes. He presented truth, beauty, and harmony in his works. Through his talent, he has opened eyes and made us more aware of the beauty of our state, our countryside, and in particular, our State flower, the Bluebonnet. The genius of this outstanding Mexican-American, Porfirio Salinas, should not - and must not - be forgotten.

Endnotes

1. Ruth Goddard, Porfirio Salinas, Austin: Rock House Press, 1975, p. 23.

2. Ibid, p. 23.

3. Ibid, p. 24.

4. Ibid, p. 25.

5. The Mexican-Texians, Texas Institute of Texas Cultures, The University of Texas at San Antonio, 1975, p. 32.

6. Joe Franz, "Song of Salinas," Bluebonnets and Cactus, Austin: Pemberton Press, 1967, p. 3.

7. Goddard, p. 16.

8. Ibid, p. 37.

9. Ibid, p. 33.

10. Ibid, p. 59.

11. Ibid, p. 68.

12. Ibid, p. 49.

13. Ibid, p. 85.

14. Dewey Bradford, "Foreword," Bluebonnets and Cactus, Austin: Pemberton Press, 1967, p. 4.